What We Owe to Each Other

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For my father

and in memory of my mother

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In September 1979, I set out to write a book in moral philosophy. I had leave from Princeton for the year and a Visiting Fellowship at All Souls College in Oxford, and I expected, quite unrealistically as it turned out, to complete a draft of the book that year. Now, more than eighteen years later, I have finally finished the task. In the interval I have received more help than anyone could possibly expect, from my family, colleagues, and students, as well as from various institutions. Innumerable family activities during these years fell under the shadows of these chapters and their many revisions. My wife, Lucy, and our daughters, Sarah and Jessie, helped by providing these diversions as well as by understanding and accepting my need to work. I am grateful to them, and especially to Lucy for her endless support and understanding.

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Contents

Introduction

We all believe that some actions are morally wrong. But when we claim that an action is wrong, what kind of judgment are we making? Judgments about right and wrong cannot be straightforwardly understood as factual claims about the empirical world or about our own psychology. Yet they do seem to make claims about some subject matter, claims which are capable of being true or false. Moreover, while certain kinds of experience can be important in putting us in a position to make moral judgments, making these judgments themselves does not seem to be a matter of observation. Rather, we arrive at the judgment that a certain kind of action would be wrong simply by thinking about the question in the right way, sometimes through a process of careful assessment that it is natural to call a kind of reasoning. But what kind of reasoning is it? Finally, the fact that a certain action would be morally wrong seems to provide a powerful reason not to do it, one that is, at least normally, decisive against any competing considerations. But it is not clear what this reason is. Why should we give considerations of right and wrong, whatever they are, this kind of priority over our other concerns and over other values? The aim of this book is to answer these questions.

In one sense, the question of the subject matter of judgments of right and wrong has an obvious answer: they are judgments about morality or, more specifically, about what is morally right. Moral judgments have the form of ordinary declarative sentences and obey the usual laws of logic. Why not just take them at face value, as making claims about what they say they are about? I believe that we should take these judgments at face value, as making claims about their apparent subject matter, right and wrong. But we also have reasons for wanting a fuller

characterization of this subject matter. One possible reason arises from a metaphysical concern. If judgments of right and wrong can be said to be true or false, this must be because there is some realm of facts that they are meant to describe, and to which they can correspond, or fail to correspond. It might therefore seem that an adequate answer to the question of subject matter should, first and foremost, make clear what part of "the world" these judgments make claims about.

But this metaphysical question is not, for me at least, the primary issue. What drives me to look for a characterization of the subject matter of judgments of right and wrong that goes beyond the trivial one I mentioned above, is not a concern about the metaphysical reality of moral facts. If we could characterize the method of reasoning through which we arrive at judgments of right and wrong, and could explain why there is good reason to give judgments arrived at in this way the kind of importance that moral judgments are normally thought to have, then we would, I believe, have given a sufficient answer to the question of the subject matter of right and wrong as well. No interesting question would remain about the ontology of morals—for example, about the metaphysical status of moral facts.

This is because, in contrast to everyday empirical judgments, scientific claims, and religious beliefs that involve claims about the origin and control of the universe, the point of judgments of right and wrong is not to make claims about what the spatiotemporal world is like. The point of such judgments is, rather, a practical one: they make claims about what we have reason to do. Metaphysical questions about the subject matter of judgments of right and wrong are important only if answers to them are required in order to show how these judgments can have this practical significance. It may be said that we need a metaphysical characterization of the subject matter of morality in order to establish that moral judgments are about something "real," but it is worth asking what kind of reality is at issue and why it is something we should be worried about.

One worry would be that there may be no right answer to questions of right and wrong. This is a serious challenge, and it may seem that in order to answer it we must provide a metaphysical account of the subject matter of judgments of this kind. I believe that this is not what is necessary, however. The question at issue is not a metaphysical one. In order to show that questions of right and wrong have correct answers, it is enough to show that we have good grounds for taking certain conclusions that actions are right or are wrong to be correct,

understood as conclusions about morality, and that we therefore have good grounds for giving these conclusions the particular importance that we normally attach to moral judgments.

A second interpretation of the charge that judgments of right and wrong are not about anything "real" would take it as the claim that they should not have this importance. This is a charge that any account of the reason-giving force of judgments of right and wrong needs to meet. But it is again not clear that an adequate response requires an account of the metaphysical status of the subject matter of such judgments, because it does not seem that the reason-giving force of facts about right and wrong derives from their metaphysical status. This is shown by the fact that it is not clear how an account of this status—for example, one showing that judgments of right and wrong are about some aspect of physical and psychological reality—would, simply in virtue of the "reality" it would give to the subject matter of judgments of right and wrong, bolster their reason-giving force.

The view I will defend takes judgments of right and wrong to be claims about reasons—more specifically about the adequacy of reasons for accepting or rejecting principles under certain conditions. It might be objected that this is to explain right and wrong in terms of something else—the idea of a reason—that is equally in need of philosophical explanation. As I will argue in Chapter 1, I do not believe that we should regard the idea of a reason as mysterious, or as one that needs, or can be given, a philosophical explanation in terms of some other, more basic notion. In particular, the idea of a reason should not be thought to present metaphysical or epistemological difficulties that render it suspect. As long, therefore, as we have suitable ways of determining whether there would or would not be good reasons for rejecting a principle under the relevant circumstances, and as long as we have reason to care about this result, a characterization of judgments right and wrong in terms of such reasons provides a satisfactory account of the subject matter of these judgments.

Thus, of the three questions about right and wrong with which I began—the questions of subject matter, method of reasoning, and reason-giving force—it is the second and especially the third which I take to be of primary concern. Accordingly, I take the reason-giving force of judgments of right and wrong as the starting point of my inquiry. I begin by offering a characterization of the reason-giving force of such judgments, and then take that characterization as the basis for an account of their subject matter.

When I ask myself what reason the fact that an action would be wrong provides me with not to do it, my answer is that such an action would be one that I could not justify to others on grounds I could expect them to accept. This leads me to describe the subject matter of judgments of right and wrong by saying that they are judgments about what would be permitted by principles that could not reasonably be rejected, by people who were moved to find principles for the general regulation of behavior that others, similarly motivated, could not reasonably reject. In particular, an act is wrong if and only if any principle that permitted it would be one that could reasonably be rejected by people with the motivation just described (or, equivalently, if and only if it would be disallowed by any principle that such people could not reasonably reject).

This description characterizes moral wrongness in a way that is appropriate for our purposes. First, it bears the right relation to our first-order moral beliefs. Those actions, such as wanton killings, that strike us intuitively as obviously wrong are also clearly wrong according to this account, since any principles that permitted these things could reasonably be rejected. More generally, it is plausible to take our intuitive judgments of right and wrong to be judgments about the subject matter just described. But this description of the subject matter of our judgments of right and wrong also has the appropriate degree of independence from our current first-order beliefs, since it leaves open the possibility that some of these beliefs are mistaken and that the authority that we now attach to those beliefs in fact belongs to others instead.

Second, this characterization describes wrongness in a way that provides plausible answers to the philosophical questions I mentioned at the outset. It describes judgments of right and wrong as judgments about reasons and justification, judgments of a kind that can be correct or incorrect and that we are capable of assessing through familiar forms of thought that should not strike us as mysterious. In addition, as I have just suggested and will argue at greater length in Chapter 4, these judgments are ones that we have reason to care about and to give great weight in deciding how to act and how to live.

Many people might agree that an act is wrong if and only if it could not be justified to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject. But they might say that this is true only because what people could or could not reasonably reject is determined by facts about what is right or wrong in a deeper sense that is independent of any idea of

reasonable rejection. So, for example, some acts are wrong because they are acts of wanton killing or acts of deception, and because they are wrong it would be reasonable to reject any principle permitting them. But this last fact is to be explained in terms of the former ones, not the other way around.

My view denies this. It holds that thinking about right and wrong is, at the most basic level, thinking about what could be justified to others on grounds that they, if appropriately motivated, could not reasonably reject. On this view the idea of justifiability to others is taken to be basic in two ways. First, it is by thinking about what could be justified to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject that we determine the shape of more specific moral notions such as murder or betrayal. Second, the idea that we have reason to avoid actions that could not be justified in this way accounts for the distinctive normative force of moral wrongness.

In the article in which I first presented this view, I referred to it as "contractualism."[1] I will continue to use this name, despite the fact that it has certain disadvantages. There are a number of other views, differing in various ways from the one I present, which are commonly called contractualist.[2] In addition, 'contract' and its cognates seem to many people to suggest a process of self-interested bargaining that is foreign to my account. What distinguishes my view from other accounts involving ideas of agreement is its conception of the motivational basis of this agreement. The parties whose agreement is in question are assumed not merely to be seeking some kind of advantage but also to be moved by the aim of finding principles that others, similarly motivated, could not reasonably reject. The idea of a shared willingness to modify our private demands in order to find a basis of justification that others also have reason to accept is a central element in the social contract tradition going back to Rousseau. One of the main reasons for calling my view "contractualist" is to emphasize its connection with this tradition.

The account of right and wrong presented in Part II is likely to strike many as a Kantian theory, and the idea that the rightness of an action is determined by whether it would be allowed by principles that no one would reasonably reject does have an obvious similarity to Kant's Categorical Imperative. In addition, my overall strategy resembles Kant's argument in the *Groundwork* in that it begins by characterizing the distinctive reason-giving force of judgments of right and wrong and takes this characterization as the key to understanding the content

of these judgments and the kind of reasoning through which we arrive at them. But my account of the reasons supporting our concern with the rightness of our actions is very different from Kant's. My strategy is to describe these reasons in substantive terms that make clear why we should find them compelling. While Kant sought to explain the special authority of moral requirements by showing how they are grounded in conditions of our rational agency, I try to explain the distinctive importance and authority of the requirements of justifiability to others by showing how other aspects of our lives and our relations with others involve this idea. The result is an account of right and wrong that is, in Kant's terms, avowedly heteronomous.

In "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," I described my project as an investigation of the nature of *morality,* and I identified, as the motivational basis of my account, a *desire* to be able to justify one's actions to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject. The structure of this book reflects the fact that both of these claims now seem to me to be mistaken.

The range of moral criticism, as most people understand it, is very broad. Various forms of behavior, such as premarital sex, homosexuality, idleness, and wastefulness, are often considered immoral even when they do not harm other people or violate any duties to them. Whether or not these forms of behavior are in fact open to serious objection, what those who believe that they are immoral have in mind is clearly not that they are wrong in the sense I described above. What I have presented is thus most plausibly seen as an account not of morality in this broad sense in which most people understand it, but rather of a narrower domain of morality having to do with our duties to other people, including such things as requirements to aid them, and prohibitions against harming, killing, coercion, and deception. This domain is the subject that has been most discussed (often under the name "morality") in contemporary moral philosophy. But while it is an important part of morality, as generally understood, it is only a part, not the whole.

It is not clear that this domain has a name. I have been referring to it as "the morality of right and wrong," and I will continue to use this label. But 'right' and 'wrong' are also commonly used in a broader sense, as when it is said that certain forms of sexual conduct or conduct that leads to the destruction of animal species is wrong. The part of morality that I have in mind is broader than justice, which has to do particularly with social institutions. 'Obligation' also picks out a

narrower field, mainly of requirements arising from specific actions or undertakings. So I have taken the phrase "what we owe to each other" as the name for this part of morality and as the title of this book, which has this domain as its main topic. I believe that this part of morality comprises a distinct subject matter, unified by a single manner of reasoning and by a common motivational basis. By contrast, it is not clear that morality in the broader sense is a single subject that has a similar unity.

I originally identified the motivational basis of "what we owe to each other" as a *desire* to act in a way that can be justified to others, because I took the idea of a desire to be clearer and less controversial than that of a reason. It seemed to me unproblematic (perhaps the least problematic claim about reasons) to say that a person who has a desire has a reason to do what will promote its fulfillment. I was inclined to believe that not all reasons are based on desires in this way, but defending this more controversial thesis did not seem necessary for my purpose, which was, primarily, to identify the reason-giving force that considerations of right and wrong have for those of us who are moved by them. I therefore characterized the source of this reason-giving force as a desire to act in ways that can be justified to others, thinking that I could leave aside such questions as what to say about those who lacked this desire and whether the fact that an act was wrong would give such people any reason to avoid it.

This strategy proved untenable, however. Many people pressed me to say whether, on my view, a person who lacked this desire would have any reason to avoid acting wrongly, and to explain how I would account for the fact that lacking this desire is a particularly serious fault. In addition, it became clear that the accounts I wanted to offer of the structure of reasoning about right and wrong, and of the relation between this part of morality and other values, were much more naturally put in terms of reasons. It was very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to present these accounts adequately within a conception of practical reasoning that took it to be a matter of figuring out how to fulfill various desires and how to balance these desires against one another. This forced me to undertake a deeper examination of reasons and rationality, which led to the conclusion that my initial assumption about reasons and desires got things almost exactly backward. Desire is not a clearer notion in terms of which the idea of having a reason might be understood; rather, the notion of a desire, in order to play the explanatory and justificatory roles commonly assigned to it, needs to

be understood in terms of the idea of taking something to be a reason. Nor do desires provide the most common kind of reasons for action; rather, it is almost never the case that a person has a reason to do something because it would satisfy a desire that he or she has. I argue for these conclusions in Chapter 1, where I also set out the ideas of rationality, irrationality, and reasonableness that are relied on in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 2 and 3 take up the notions of value and well-being. It is commonly supposed that value (or "the good") and individual well-being are notions that are independent of the part of morality that is my main concern. They can thus provide grounds on which the requirements that make up this part of morality can be justified, but they also constitute a potential source of difficulty for it, since its requirements may conflict with the promotion of well-being and other forms of value. To be valuable, or "good," on this common view, is to be something that is to be brought about or promoted. The things that are valuable are thus states of affairs, or components of states of affairs, and one of the main things that contribute to the value of a state of affairs is the well-being of the individuals in it. Most other things are valuable because of the contribution they make to individual well-being. In Chapter 3 I argue that this common view of well-being as a "master value" is mistaken, and I argue against the idea that there is a single notion of well-being that should play a central role both in individual decision-making and in the justification of moral principles. Chapter 2 attacks the more general idea that to be valuable is to be "to be promoted." My argument proceeds by examining some of the things that are generally held to be valuable, such as friendship and intellectual and artistic accomplishment. Recognizing these things as valuable does involve seeing some states of affairs as "to be promoted," but I argue that not all the reasons that are involved in recognizing these values or most others are reasons to promote certain states of affairs. In particular, I argue that to recognize human life as valuable is, first and foremost, to see the reasons we have for treating others in ways that accord with principles that they could not reasonably reject. This connects the sphere of value, or "the good," with "what we owe to each other" in a way that reduces the apparent conflict between them.

Chapter 4 presents my account of the motivational basis of what we owe to each other and shows how this account can explain the priority and importance that moral considerations are generally thought to

have. Chapter 5 then describes the structure that moral justification takes on this account, examining and elaborating the idea of principles that no one can reasonably reject.

The idea of responsibility, and the notions of freedom and voluntariness that it involves, play important roles in the content of these principles and also in the process of justifying them, since the force of a person's reasons for rejecting a principle that would require him to bear a certain burden can be reduced by the fact that this burden is one he could have avoided by choosing appropriately. The idea of responsibility is also relevant to moral assessment in another, equally familiar, way as a condition for attributing an action to an agent as one for which he or she can be morally assessed. The aim of Chapter 6 is to show how my version of contractualism explains these two notions of responsibility, and to argue for the importance of distinguishing between them. Chapter 7 considers the duty to keep a promise, duties not to lie, and related duties concerning the expectations we lead others to form. The arguments for these duties provide examples of the process of justification described in Chapter 5. In addition, since the validity of a promise depends on its being made voluntarily, these arguments illustrate points made in Chapter 6 about the ways in which ideas of freedom and voluntariness figure in the justification of moral principles.

Promises as I describe them do not, however, provide the only ostensibly moral reasons for keeping one's word, and at the end of Chapter 7 I will discuss some other reasons, such as those arising from oaths and ideals of personal honor. These provide useful examples for the discussion of moral relativism in Chapter 8. My account of the morality of right and wrong is not a form of relativism, but it allows for considerable variability in what is morally required, both because a variety of requirements can be justified within my account of what we owe to each other, and because of the plurality of values that morality in the broader sense can include. I argue that this is as much variability as a reasonable relativist could require. The range of actual disagreement about right and wrong is broader than this, however, and in the last part of Chapter 8 I will consider how this disagreement should be understood and what conclusions we should draw from it.

The possibility of such disagreement raises a question about the kind of claim I am making in Part II of this book. I argue that contractualism provides the best interpretation of what at least many of us are claiming when we say that an action is morally wrong. But I am not

offering it as an account of the meaning of the word 'wrong' or of the expression 'morally wrong'. These terms can be used by people who hold noncontractualist accounts of morality, such as utilitarian or divine command theories, and it would not be plausible to claim that in such cases these words are being misused or have a different meaning. People who hold noncontractualist views about moral wrongness would agree with contractualists that to call an action morally wrong is to say that it violates important standards of conduct and is therefore open to serious criticism. Perhaps this much is part of the meaning of these terms. But holders of these different views disagree about what these standards are and about what it is that makes them authoritative. As a result, when they claim that actions are wrong the claims they are making have overlapping but divergent content. I will sometimes say in such cases that people have in mind different "senses" of moral wrongness. This is not, however, to say that the words involved have multiple meanings but rather that, with their ordinary meanings, they are used to express different claims.

It might be said that the holders of such views disagree about what makes acts wrong, and that this is what I am offering a particular account of in this book. This description is plausible in at least two respects. First, part of what I am offering is a characterization of certain standards by which, I argue, the rightness or wrongness of actions should be judged; so it seems appropriate to call this an account of what makes acts wrong. Second, in order for different moral views (contractualist, utilitarian, divine command, and so on) to be actually disagreeing, they have to be talking about the same thing and making competing claims about it. One natural way to describe the situation is thus to say that they agree about what wrongness is, and are disagreeing about what gives acts this property.

Two considerations count against this way of describing things, however. The first is that giving an account of what makes acts wrong, on the most natural understanding of that phrase, is a matter of identifying the relevant wrong-making properties, such as being an intentional killing or the breaking of a promise. The view just suggested is that being disallowed by any principles that no one could reasonably reject should be understood simply as a more general property of this kind, a property which, like these more specific wrong-making properties, brings with it the (separate) property of being morally wrong. This further property then provides reasons to avoid acting in the way specified, to criticize those who so act, and so on. But,

while one aim of my contractualist account is to give a general criterion of wrongness that explains and links these more specific wrong-making properties, this is not its only, or even its chief, aim. It also aims to characterize wrongness in a way that makes clear what reasons wrongness provides, and this aim goes beyond saying "what makes acts wrong," at least on the most natural reading of these words.

A second problem with this description emerges when we ask what the property of moral wrongness is supposed to be on this account. If the views I have mentioned agree about what wrongness is and disagree only about what makes acts wrong, what is the property about which they agree? Since these views disagree both about the content of moral standards and about the ground of their authority, it would seem that the property that is the shared object of their disagreement must either be an unanalyzable normative property of wrongness (akin to the simple, unanalyzable, non-natural property of goodness that G. E. Moore believed he had identified) or else the higher-order property of violating (some or other) important standards of conduct and therefore being open to (some or other) serious objection.

As I argue in Chapter 2, I believe that a formal, or "buck-passing," analysis of the latter kind is correct in the case of goodness and value. Goodness is not a single substantive property which gives us reason to promote or prefer the things that have it. Rather, to call something good is to claim that it has other properties (different ones in different cases) which provide such reasons. But wrongness seems different. In at least a wide range of cases, the fact that an act is wrong seems itself to provide us with a reason not to do it, rather than merely indicating the presence of other reasons (although it may do that as well).

A Moorean account of the kind just mentioned would be in accord with this intuition, since it would identify wrongness as a specific unanalyzable, non-natural property that provides us with reasons. The problem with such an account is not that this property would be "non-natural." (I am quite willing to accept that "being a reason for" is an unanalyzable, normative, hence non-natural relation.) The difficulty is rather that an account that simply points to an unanalyzable property of wrongness leaves unexplained the reasons we have to avoid actions that are wrong and to criticize those who engage in them. I believe that it is possible to say more about what these reasons are, and one of the main aims of my contractualist theory is to do this. Many utilitarian theories, divine command theories, and other accounts are best understood as offering alternative explanations. It

therefore seems to me that contractualism and these other views are better described as rival accounts of the property of moral wrongness itself, rather than as differing accounts of the conditions under which actions have that property.[3]

It may be helpful here to consider an analogy between the distinction I have just been discussing and the distinction between our concept of a natural kind, such as gold, and the property of being gold.[4] Whatever our concept of gold may be, the property of being gold is the property of having the physical constitution that is typical of that substance and underlies its observed characteristics, such as being yellow, malleable, and resistant to certain acids. It was an empirical discovery, not a conceptual truth, that, for example, gold has a certain atomic structure. Similarly, whatever our concept of a tiger may be, the property of being a tiger is the property of having the physical nature that is typical of creatures belonging to that species. Unlike gold and tiger, moral wrongness is not a natural kind; but it is what might be called a normative kind. That is to say, the property of moral wrongness can be identified with a certain normatively significant property which is shared by actions that are wrong and which accounts for their observed normative features, such as the fact that we have reason to avoid such actions, to criticize those who perform them, and so on.

Adopting this analogy for the moment, one of the claims I will argue for in Chapter 4 can be put as the claim that the actions that are commonly taken to merit moral disapproval in the very broadest sense of the term 'moral' do not, in fact, form a single normative kind. That is to say, there is no single normatively significant property which they all have and which provides the main reason not to perform them. (This does not mean that there may not be, in each case, good reason not to do these things, and hence that they may all have the higher-order property of being actions which there is good reason to avoid and which are therefore open to serious criticism.) But the contractualist theory that I will set out in Chapters 4 and 5 provides an account of the normative kind to which a large and central class of the things we normally call "morally wrong" belong. Because this class is both large and central, I will refer to what I am offering as an account of the morality of right and wrong even though, as I will note below, the expression 'morally wrong' is also used in the broader sense just mentioned. Similarly, if the stuff we normally call gold turned out not all to be examples of the same substance, we would still refer to a

characterization of the substance that most, although not all, of the stuff we have called gold is as an account of the nature of gold.

This example shows the limits of the analogy between wrongness and natural kinds, however. If gold has a certain physical structure, then people who believe that it has some other structure, or who call stuff that does not have this structure gold, are simply mistaken. In the case of morality, however, there may be more room for differing views. Suppose that contractualism offers a satisfactory account of at least a large and central class of our judgments of right and wrong. Suppose that it identifies a property that many actions that we call morally wrong seem in fact to have; that this property seems to be connected in the right way with our reasons for thinking those actions to be wrong; and that it provides a plausible interpretation of reasons for avoiding such actions and criticizing those who perform them. If a competing account of moral wrongness cites, as the reason for avoiding actions that is given by the fact that they are wrong, some consideration that is not a good reason at all, or is not a reason of the right kind, then that view is simply mistaken. But even if the contractualist account is fully satisfactory in the ways I have described (and even if it is the most satisfactory such account), there may still be other reasons for avoiding some of the actions commonly held to be morally wrong. Alternative accounts of wrongness that emphasize these other reasons, and which may therefore pick out a different subset of the actions that people think of as morally wrong than contractualism does, may therefore deserve to be taken seriously in certain ways, even if they cannot claim to be the best account of wrongness. I will consider the possibility of such accounts in Chapter 8.

What began as an investigation of "the nature of morality" has ended as a book dealing with three concentric and successively narrower normative domains: reasons, values, and what we owe to each other. Chapter 1 provides a general account of reasons and rationality; Chapters 2 and 3 give an analysis, in terms of reasons, of the general idea of value and of ideas of individual well-being; and Chapters 4 through 7 examine what we owe to each other, seen as an aspect of one central value, the value of human, or rational, life.

PART I

REASONS AND VALUES

1

Reasons

1. Introduction

I will take the idea of a reason as primitive. Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. "Counts in favor how?" one might ask. "By providing a reason for it" seems to be the only answer. So I will presuppose the idea of a reason, and presuppose also that my readers are rational in the minimal but fundamental sense that I will presently explain.

The idea of a reason does not seem to me to be a problematic one that stands in need of explanation. I will say something in Section 11 about why various attempts—dispositional, expressivist, and so on—to explain this notion strike me as unsatisfactory. I doubt whether any general account of this kind could succeed, but it is not my present purpose to argue that this is the case, since nothing that I will go on to say depends on it. The claims about value and morality that I will be making in later chapters would be compatible with any deeper account of reasons which left the contours of our ordinary notions of reasons and rationality undisturbed. The main aim of this chapter is to describe what I take those contours to be, and to do so in a way that will, I hope, lend support to my claim that the idea of a reason should not be seen as problematic. I will also try to present the matter in such a way as to make it plausible that if there is a problem about reasons it is a general one about reasons of all kinds. There is no particular problem about practical reasons, or reasons for action. If the kind of reasons that we respond to when we decide that a certain action is morally wrong stand in need of explanation, what needs explaining is the notion of moral wrongness, not the general idea of a reason for action.

My strategy will be to locate reasons, in the sense I will be concerned with, as the central element in a familiar form of reflection, and to call attention to structural features which I argue are common to thinking about reasons of all kinds: reasons for belief, for action, and for such attitudes as fear, resentment, and admiration. Since reasons for action have been thought to bear a distinctively close relation to, and perhaps even to be dependent on, desires, I will discuss the relation between reasons and desires. I will argue that desires, insofar as they are distinguished from the recognition of reasons, have a much less fundamental role in practical thinking than is commonly supposed. Indeed, I have become convinced that insofar as "having a desire" is understood as a state that is distinct from "seeing something as a reason," it plays almost no role in the justification and explanation of action. My aim in all of this will be to make clear the role that I take reasons to play in our own thinking and in argument with each other, thus providing a basis for my discussion of values and well-being in Chapters 2 and 3, and for the discussion, in the chapters that follow, of the structure and motivational basis of our ideas of right and wrong.

2. Judgment-Sensitive Attitudes

The rudimentary observation that a reason is a consideration that "counts in favor of" something points toward a question, "In favor of what?" and hence toward an important distinction, between those things for which reasons, in the sense I have in mind, can sensibly be offered or requested and those for which they cannot. It makes no sense to demand a reason, in this sense, for an event in the world that is unconnected with any intentional subject. I might ask, "Why is the volcano going to erupt?" But what I would be understood to be asking for is an explanation, a reason why the eruption is going to occur, and this would not (at least among most contemporary people) take the form of giving the volcano's reason for erupting.

I might also ask, "Why do *you think* that the volcano is going to erupt?" and there are at least two things that I might be asking. First and most naturally, I might be taken to be asking you to give a justification for this belief. "Why should one think that the volcano will erupt? What reason is there to think this?" This is the sense of "reason" that I will be concerned with. I will call it the standard, normative sense. I have just illustrated this sense by citing reasons for

belief, but reasons in the same sense can be asked for and given for other attitudes such as intentions and fears.

In offering a justification for the belief that the volcano will erupt you may also be explaining how you came to have that belief: you have it because you have taken it to be supported by these reasons. As I will emphasize in a moment, it is characteristic of attitudes like belief that there is a close tie between justification and this kind of explanation. Nonetheless, the two can come apart. There is a difference between asking what reason there is for believing that P and asking what a given person's reason for believing it was. (I will refer to the latter as the person's *operative* reason.) Both of these questions have to do with what I am calling "reasons in the standard normative sense." The first asks for an assessment of the grounds for taking P to be the case, while the second asks what, as a matter of biographical fact, Jones took to be a reason for believing it. So, while both questions deal with the idea of a reason in the standard normative sense, it is the first question that is primary: the second is concerned with what an individual takes to be reasons in this primary sense.

What I am concerned with, then, are reasons in the "standard normative sense." So when I say that something is or is not a reason I will not be concerned with whether it is or could be someone's operative reason but with whether it is a *good* reason—a consideration that really counts in favor of the thing in question. It may seem that in simply assuming the notion of a reason in a fully normative sense, and by assuming that rational agents are capable of making and being moved by judgments about reasons in this sense, I am begging an important question in contemporary debates about reasons. But I do not think that these matters are really in dispute in the contemporary discussion of these issues.

To begin with, it is difficult to see how they could be in dispute. Genuine skepticism about reasons—skepticism about whether anything ever "counts in favor of" anything else in the sense typical of reasons, or about whether we are actually capable of making judgments about when this is the case—would be a very difficult position to hold. Perhaps one could hold such skepticism just about reasons for action, holding that although various states in fact move us to act, there is no sense to the question of when we have good reason for these actions. But even this view strikes me as awkward and unstable. To hold it consistently one would need to regard all one's actions as things that merely happen, and to abstain from taking at face value

Index